

San José State University Department of English and Comparative Literature
ENGLISH 241: MFA Fiction Workshop, Fall 2018
Establishing Voice, Building Characters and Structuring the Story

"True artists, whatever smiling faces they may show you, are obsessive, driven people... No critical study, however brilliant, is the fierce psychological battle a novel is."- John Gardner, The Art of Fiction

Lurie Chair 2019: Nayomi Munaweera
Classroom: BBC221
Days: Thursdays
Time: 16:00-18:45 (4-6:45pm.)
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Office hours: Thursdays 1-3pm and by appointment

Course Description: This is the most advanced fiction workshop offered at SJSU. It is designed for students pursuing writing as a vocation. Students enrolled in the MFA Program in Creative Writing have registration priority. If there is extra space, graduate students in other disciplines and Open University students may enroll with instructor permission. The majority of our class time will be spent discussing student work. We will also read from texts that I will make available to you throughout the semester. If you miss class it is your responsibility to find out what the readings are from me.

The class is based around the concepts of voice, character-building, story structure and reflection/revision. We will take a tour of different styles of creative writing, learning what's been invented, and we'll do a lot of our own new writing as well. Additionally, we will discuss aspects of the writing profession. Topics include finding time to write, managing time, revision, genre, using material, finding an agent or publisher, and net- working.

Workshop Ethos: Students will workshop their own work at least twice during the term (2,000-5,000 words- do not turn in more than 5000 words) and will also be required to provide written feedback to their classmates when their classmates are the focus of the workshop. We'll also read the work of acclaimed writers every week and we will examine what we've read through in-class discussion and group book reports (each group will be responsible for one report to the class) to "open up" the work from an artist's vantage point.

The objectives of this course are to study and work toward establishing our voice(s) as writers, to learn in nuanced fashion the deep lives of our characters, and to competently structure our stories.

Workshop Procedure: At the first class meeting, I will pass around a sign-up sheet for workshops. Each of you will choose at least two dates when you want to hand in original work. On those dates, you will pass out photocopies of your piece to everyone in the class. Your piece must be double-spaced and it must include page numbers. Your classmates will read your work, make comments in the margins, and type a commentary of at least three-quarters of a page in length. At the next class meeting, we will discuss your story. We will discuss up to four stories per class. At the end of the discussion, everyone will hand the author their marked-up manuscripts and commentaries.

Your typed commentary on each student story will address (a) your interpretation of the story (what the story is about, what the author is trying to accomplish) and (b) suggestions for improvement. Please

print two copies of your commentary – one for the author and one for me, the instructor. A portion of your final grade will be determined by the quality of your peer commentaries.

Student-led discussions: One of the most useful skills you can learn in graduate school is how to lead a discussion. Students will get their feet wet with this by leading a discussion of one of the required texts for this class. The discussion should run for roughly 20 minutes in length and should have as its focus aspects of craft within the chosen text.

Classroom Decorum: In a workshop, writers must feel safe sharing their work with the group. Please keep your critiques confined to the work, not the author. Hostile, threatening, or ad hominem criticism will not be tolerated. If you feel threatened by a classmate, please bring the issue to my attention so I can address it promptly.

Course Learning Outcomes (CLO):

This course addresses the following Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) approved for the MFA in Creative Writing:

- SLO 3: Students will demonstrate an appropriate level of knowledge of literary history, literary theory, and craft and theory of creative writing.
- SLO 4: Students will demonstrate critical and analytical skills in the evaluation and interpretation of literary texts.
- SLO 5: Students will demonstrate a command of written academic English, including the abilities to: a) organize and present material in a cogent fashion; b) formulate and defend original arguments; c) employ effectively the language of their discipline; d) write under time constraints.

Class Schedule (subject to change):

Note: as a working writer I have various responsibilities/ appearances that have been scheduled months in advance and cannot be changed. Because of this we will not be meeting on February 7th when I will be the Visiting Writer at Vanderbilt University and on March 28th when I will be at AWP. I hope you use this time to work on your writing and perfect your prose. If you are at AWP (I hope most of you are going-come by my panels and say hello.)

1. January 24th-Introduction etc
2. January 31st “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” Ursula K LeGuin
http://www.mccc.edu/pdf/eng102/Week%209/Text_LeGuin%20Ursula_Ones%20Who%20Walk%20Away%20From%20Omelas.pdf
3. February 14th “The Flowers” Alice Walker
<http://theliterarylink.com/flowers.html>
“They’re Made of Meat” Terry Bisson
<http://www.terrybisson.com/page6/page6.html>
4. February 21st “The Husband Stitch” Carman Maria Machado
<https://granta.com/the-husband-stitch/>
5. February 28th “Sea Oak” George Saunders
http://www.barcelonareview.com/20/e_gs.htm

6. March 6th "Semplica Girl Diaries" George Saunders
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/10/15/the-semplica-girl-diaries>

7. March 14th
"My Purple Scented Novel" Ian McEwan
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/03/28/my-purple-scented-novel-fiction-by-ian-mcewan>

8. March 21st
"The Hunter's Wife" Anthony Doerr
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2001/05/the-hunters-wife/302198/>

Spring Break April 1-5th

9. April 11th

10. April 18th

11. April 25th

12. May 2nd

13. May 9th

Attendance at Literary Readings:

You are required to attend two readings by poets or prose writers presented on the SJSU campus or elsewhere. The Bay Area is one of the world's great literary regions, where seven days a week one can attend a reading by a renowned writer at a bookstore, college, community center, or library. Readings are listed in the Sunday editions of the San Jose Mercury News, San Francisco Chronicle and LitSeen.

After attending each reading, you will write a brief response paper (2 pages). The writing may be free form as long as you respond in some detail to any aspect of the reading, for example the speaker, the venue, the material performed, or the Q&A with the audience. Here are a few literary events to be aware of. I'm sure I'll be adding a few more as the semester goes on.

January 24th Amparo Davila, City Lights, 261 Columbus Ave, San Francisco, 7pm

January 24th Kirsten Roupenian, The Bindery, 1727 Haight ST, San Francisco, 7:30 pm

January 27th Sarah Stone, Mrs Dalloway's, 2904 College Ave, Berkeley, 3-5 pm

February 6th Esme Weijun Wang Book Launch, Green Apple Books, 1231 9th Ave, San Francisco, 7:30 pm

February 7th Analicia Sotelo and Vanessa Fernandez, San Jose Museum of Art, 7pm

February 12th Joyce Carol Oates, City Lights, 261 Columbus Ave, SF, 7pm (Get there at least an hour early)

February 19th Marlon James at the Norse Theatre, 275 Hayes St, SF (ticketed at \$29- get tickets early)

February 25th Tommy Orange at the Norse Theatre, 275 Hayes St, SF (ticketed at \$29- get tickets early.)

February 26th Charlie Jane Anders, Kepler's Books, 1010 El Camino Real, Menlo Park, 7:30pm

February 27th Rebecca Solnit at the Norse Theatre, 275 Hayes St, SF (ticketed at \$29- get tickets early)

February 28th Lurie Chair Reading (me!) MLK Library Room 225/229, 7pm

March 7th Shoba Rao with Ingrid Rojas Contreras at The Bindery, 1727 Haight St, San Francisco, 7pm

March 7th Steinbeck Fellows Alumni Night MLK Library, Steinbeck Center, Room 590

March 19th Paul Beatty, Hammer Theatre, 7pm

April 2nd Rhea Mukherjee and Adam Nemmett at City Lights, 261 Columbus Ave, San Francisco, 7pm

Final Examination/Evaluation:

In lieu of a final exam, you will turn in a substantial revision of one of your workshop submissions. Examples of changes that might be included in a substantial revision include adding or deleting a character, changing the point of view, inserting a new scene, and altering the ending of the story. It is not enough simply to correct the spelling and grammatical errors of the first draft. To earn a high grade on the revision, you must alter the story in some significant way. The revision is due the last day of class.

Late Assignment Policy:

It is important that you turn in your stories when you say you're going to. This is your most important responsibility in this class.

Late or emailed stories will not be accepted. If you need to change your workshop date, it is your responsibility to find someone willing to trade dates with you, and to tell me that you've switched prior to the date when your work was scheduled to be workshopped.

University Policies:

Per University Policy S16-9, university-wide policy information relevant to all courses, such as academic integrity, accommodations, etc. will be available on Office of Graduate and Under-graduate Programs' Syllabus Information web page.

Determination of Grades:

The Department of English reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined by the SJSU Catalog (Grades-Letter Grading). Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: A+/A/A-= excellent; B+/B/B-= above average; C+/C/C-= average; D+/D/D-= below average; F= failure. Within any of the letter grade ranges (e.g. B+/B/B-), the assignment of a + or - grade will reflect stronger (+) or weaker (-) completion of the goals of the assignment.

A+/A/A-: Satisfactory participation in at least 2 workshops as the writer; provided feedback to all writers being workshopped; one book report completed; 2 reflection papers completed

B+/B/B-: Satisfactory participation in at least 2 workshops as the writer; provided feedback to most writers being workshopped; one book report completed; reflection paper completed

C+/C/C-: Satisfactory participation in at least 2 workshops as the writer; provided sporadic feedback to writers being workshopped; reflection paper completed

D+/D/D-: Incomplete: Satisfactory participation in 1 workshop as the writer; some class exercises completed

F: Almost no work completed

Final grades will be the product of the following factors:

Your fiction (2-3 new pieces and a revision) 60%

Peer commentaries 20%

Response papers on two literary readings 10%

Student-led discussion and participation in workshop exercises 10%